

Super 14 2007 Analysis for a better RWC Understanding

By Frederick Claro - May 2007 -

We previously analyzed some data from the round robin phase of the competition. We will here review some essential statistical notions for a better understanding of what we can expect with the coming RWC in France.

Once again, facts have shown that the physicality and conditioning development to gear the teams towards a faster game with more Actual Game Time (AGT) and continuity are paramount to achieve top results in rugby today. Let's review the AGT of the two semi-finals and final and let's draw some comparisons with past competitions.

Semi-Final #1	Semi-Final #2	Final
Natal Sharks-Auckland Blues	Blue Bulls-Canterbury Crusaders	Natal Sharks-Blue Bulls
44%	43%	43%

Super 14 semis and final AGT stat

When we look in the past (please refer to other articles on this website), nothing have much changed for New Zealand teams in terms of AGT, where playing in the range of 44 to 45% is in the comfort zone for NZ players. What is new however, is the increase of AGT for the South African teams.

In the last few years of Super 12 and 14 competition, South African teams were playing anywhere in the range of 38 to 40% of AGT. Beyond 40% players were in the "red" physically and fatigue affected much more their decision making. In 2004 and 2005, analyzed games between South African teams competing with each other invariably produced an average AGT of 39% (similar in that of what we find in European rugby except for Ireland, whose rugby made considerable progress on this issue). As a result, if in the past South African teams were unable to impose their own pace during the game, they were invariably physically outmatched on fitness and stamina grounds by their NZ and some Australians counterparts.

In the final stages of the competition, the two top South African teams were able to compete at an average of 43.33 % of AGT, hence representing a 12% AGT increase compared with the last two years. The final was for the first time ever opposing two South African teams, who made History that day. Even in competing against each other they maintained an AGT of 43% showing there the possible new emergence of a pattern, time only will show, but I believe it will be confirmed. This has been possible through a change of South African rugby in its global approach. From a slower, field position based game, it evolved to a more total type of play with less kicking, and more ball carrying ensuring more continuity.

This has been the very big issue of the competition: The re-emergence of South African rugby through an adaptation to the needs of the modern game. In embracing this playing philosophy, they are joining the few international teams who already understood that supreme conditioning generating faster play and asphyxiate the oppositions is the very key to success in modern rugby. These few teams are: New Zealand, Australia, Ireland and Wales. If they can transfer this to the Springboks side, South Africa will be a real contender for supreme honor in Paris this coming October.

It would also be good to bring some perspective to the ending of the 2007 Super 14 competition in the wake of the coming RWC. Without depreciating the great performances of South African rugby teams in this year competition, we certainly also have to recognize that it was made clear through the withdrawal of 22 All Blacks from their respective team to follow a reconditioning program with the RWC in perspective, that the Super 14 competition was not the objective of NZ rugby in 2007. Lots have been said, but time will show that it was the right thing to do at the right time.

Moreover, I believe after seeing the last few games of the round robin and the semi-finals, that there might have also been some directive given to NZ franchises to refrain playing some trademark game style in order to deny oppositions training practice runs at NZ game. I also do believe that this was a strategy put in place by the All Blacks coaching staff throughout the 2006 campaigns of the tri-nations and the November tour.

The downfall of the All Blacks in RWC 2003 was their lack of "plan B" in some instances and also the fact that they had nothing hidden in getting to the competition. Everyone knew what to expect, and it was up to the oppositions to mastermind a pattern to defeat them, which was successfully done in the semis. The lesson has been learnt well, and the current coaching staff developed the team in such a way, that they can still beat oppositions in playing a somehow restrictive kind of game. On that ground, the 2005 grand slam tours of the British Isles fulfilled its purpose superbly as the purposefully restricted game style offered to the oppositions brought indeed the team to a lot of pressure (remember that thrilling Twicker game?..) out of which they managed to steam through, still bringing victory and a lot of mental toughness in the process to this breed of NZ players.

Four months to go before RWC 2007, time has already run out for a lot of teams. As far as I am concerned, I do not see any team drilled and conditioned well enough to outsmart or outmuscle the All Blacks. But in the wake of what we saw in this 2007 Super 14 competition, the All Blacks-Springboks semi-final if everything goes according to plan, will be a shocker and a must keep on DVD for a long time to come! The only European team in my opinion who will be a contender enough should be Ireland. But with bruising games against France and Argentina in the group segment of the competition, they must finish 1st of the group or face the All Blacks in quarter final, and with the obvious lack of depth at key positions of the Irish team, it will be a tough call against the Black armada who will present two interchangeable, well trained and drilled teams.

My belief is that RWC 2007 will mark a cornerstone in rugby evolution. We are assisting at the end of an era, and there will be talks of rugby before and after RWC 2007 in matters such as conditioning development, technical and tactical astuteness, and overall physicality.

NZ rugby has been shaping the rugby of the future starting with the RWC 2003. John Mitchell's era opened doors and he unfortunately didn't have the time to finish the job. The actual coaching staff is bringing this team beyond anything ever done at that level previously, because they learnt from mistakes made.

Looking at the athletic capacities and polyvalence of NZ players, I am convinced that NZ rugby is finding the right mix for the players of tomorrow: between a long jumper and a rugby league player, for who bulk is not important any longer as static phases are non-contesting. We will see the dawn of a new rugby era... Lucky us!

Safe training!